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Ryan Blethen / Times editorial columnist

Elections: from rank to ranked



There has been a lot of talk about the record turnout for last Saturday's caucuses.

Big deal. I guess it was a success when compared with the history of Washington state's meagerly attended caucuses.

Saying the caucus was a success is like marvelling about a SuperSonics crowd when the Cleveland Cavaliers are in town. More people turn out to see LeBron James, but the improved attendance is just a blip in a long season of empty seats.

Washingtonians were lucky the caucuses mattered at all. The caucus would have been nearly insignificant if either Sens. Barack Obama or Hillary Rodham Clinton had won a decisive victory on Super Tuesday. That did not happen.

What the two major parties, particularly the Democrats, have given us is an unnecessarily fractured and discouraging system. Last summer, the Democrats totally blew off voters by deciding to ignore this coming Tuesday's primary and award all delegates according to the caucus results. The Republicans acted somewhat more in the public's interest by choosing to use the primary to seat about half their delegates.

While the numbers were large as far as caucuses go, the turnout was low compared with a primary. The state's last presidential primary in 2000 — 2004's was dropped because of budget issues — drew 1.3 million register voters, while this year's caucus was nowhere near that number. The precise number of caucus-goers is not yet clear. Originally, the Democrats said 200,000, then the number was pumped up to 250,000.

If the parties cared about democratic input from an energized public they would scrap the Tammany Hall caucus for the presidential primary, which the voters passed into law in 1988.

My wife's frustration with the caucus and primary are emblematic of many who are sitting out this round of voting. The logistics of caucusing did not work for her on a Saturday with two kids at home and me out of town. She will not vote in the primary because the ballot requires her to sign a party oath.

The political establishment risks eroding its power by focusing solely on perpetuating its goals through a tightly controlled process designed for party activists at the expense of independent-minded folks like my wife.

There are small signs that voters are pushing for electoral change. Two years ago, Pierce County voters adopted ranked-choice voting, otherwise known as instant-runoff voting. They affirmed their decision by overwhelmingly rejecting a ballot measure that would have delayed ranked choice by two years — until 2010. The King County Charter Review Commission has taken note and is considering ranked choice.

Ranked choice voting is a nice fit for populist Washington. Voters rank the candidates on the ballot in order of preference. A runoff happens when nobody receives a majority. The last-place candidate is eliminated and the voters' second-choice votes are transferred to the surviving candidates. A winner is declared when one candidate achieves a majority.

The parties should not fear this system because it still allows the parties to put their candidates on the ballot, yet makes room for third parties and independents.

I do not foresee ranked choice happening for presidential contests. Too bad. I do predict it to grow roots in ground made fertile by voter outrage in this state.

In an e-mail exchange with Richard Anderson-Connolly, the leader of the ranked-choice-voting movement in Pierce County, I asked what he thought about the caucus. Did it turn voters off or energize them? What about Tuesday's primary?

"... I would say that most people have a low sense of efficacy regarding the nomination process," said Anderson-Connolly, an associate professor at the University of Puget Sound and president of Instant Runoff Voting in Washington. "More cynically, I would say that the two parties want it that way. In part it is this lack of control over these political institutions that makes a reform like RCV very attractive

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right now."

Unless the parties act in the interest of voters, my wife, and many like her, will continue to grow distant from the election process.

It does not have to be that way. The parties need to open the system. If they do not, electoral visions like Anderson-Connolly's will spread county by county, state by state.

Ryan Blethen's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. His e-mail address is rblethen@seattletimes.com; for a podcast Q&A with the author, go to [Opinion at seattletimes.com](#)

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